

Into the Wild, Chapter 6 "Anza-Borrego"

McCandless made an indelible impression on a number of people during the course of his *higra*, most of whom spent only a few days in his company, a week or two at most. Nobody, however, was affected more powerfully by his or her brief contact with the boy than Ronald Franz, who was eighty years old when their paths intersected in January 1992.

After McCandless bid farewell to Jan Burres at the Salton City Post Office, he hiked into the desert and set up camp in a brake of creosote at the edge of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. [...]

Away from the lakeshore the land rises gently and then abruptly to form the desiccated, phantasmal badlands of Anza-Borrego. [...] Here, on a low, sun-scorched rise dotted with chollas and indigobushes and twelve-foot ocotillo stems, McCandless slept on the sand under a tarp hung from a creosote branch.

When he needed provisions, he would hitch or walk the four miles into town, where he bought rice and filled his plastic water jug at the market-liquor store-post office, a beige stucco building that serves as the cultural nexus of greater Salton City. One Thursday in mid-January, McCandless was hitching back out to the bajada after filling his jug when an old man, name of Ron Franz, stopped to give him a ride.

"Where's your camp?" Franz inquired.

"Out past Oh-My-God Hot Springs," McCandless replied.

"I've lived in these parts six years now, and I've never heard of any place goes by that name. Show me how to get there."

They drove for a few minutes down the Borrego-Salton Sea-way, and then McCandless told him to turn left into the desert, where a rough 4-x-4 track twisted down a narrow wash. After a mile or so they arrived at a bizarre encampment, where some two hundred people had gathered to spend the winter living out of their vehicles. The community was beyond the fringe, a vision of post-apocalypse America. There were families sheltered in cheap tent trailers, aging hippies in Day-Glo vans, Charles Manson look-alikes sleeping in rusted-out Studebakers that hadn't turned over since Eisenhower was in the White House. A substantial number of those present were walking around buck naked. At the center of the camp, water from a geothermal well had been piped into a pair of shallow, steaming pools lined

with rocks and shaded by palm trees: Oh-My-God Hot Springs.

McCandless, however, wasn't living right at the springs; he was camped by himself another half mile out on the bajada. Franz drove Alex the rest of the way, chatted with him there for a while, and then returned to town, where he lived alone, rent free, in re-turn for managing a ramshackle apartment building.

Franz, a devout Christian, had spent most of his adult life in the army, stationed in Shanghai and Okinawa. On New Year's Eve 1957, while he was overseas, his wife and only child were killed by a drunk driver in an automobile accident. Franz's son had been due to graduate from medical school the following June. Franz started hitting the whiskey, hard.

Six months later he managed to pull himself together and quit drinking, cold turkey, but he never really got over the loss. To salve his loneliness in the years after the accident, he started un-officially "adopting" indigent Okinawan boys and girls, [.....] When Franz met McCandless, his long-dormant paternal impulses were kindled anew. He couldn't get the young man out of his mind. The boy had said his name was Alex—he'd declined to give a surname—and that he came from West Virginia. He was polite, friendly, well-groomed.

"He seemed extremely intelligent," Franz states in an exotic brogue that sounds like a blend of Scottish, Pennsylvania Dutch, and Carolina drawl. "I thought he was too nice a kid to be living by that hot springs with those nudists and drunks and dope smokers." After attending church that Sunday, Franz decided to talk to Alex "about how he was living. Somebody needed to convince him to get an education and a job and make something of his life."

When he returned to McCandless's camp and launched into the self-improvement pitch, though, McCandless cut him off abruptly. "Look, Mr. Franz," he declared, "you don't n^ed to worry about me. I have a college education. I'm not destitute. I'm living like this by choice." And then, despite his initial prickli-ness, the young man warmed to the old-timer, and the two engaged in a long conversation.

[...]

An accomplished leatherworker, Franz taught Alex the secrets of his craft; for his first project McCandless produced a tooled leather belt, on which he created an artful pictorial record of his wanderings. ALEX is inscribed at

the belt's left end; then the initials C.J.M. (for Christopher Johnson McCandless) frame a skull and crossbones. Across the strip of cowhide one sees a rendering of a two-lane blacktop, a NO U-TURN sign, a thunderstorm producing a flash flood that engulfs a car, a hitchhiker's thumb, an eagle, the Sierra Nevada, salmon cavorting in the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Coast Highway from Oregon to Washington, the Rocky Mountains, Montana wheat fields, a South Dakota rattlesnake, Westerberg's house in Carthage, the Colorado River, a gale in the Gulf of California, a canoe beached beside a tent, Las Vegas, the initials T.C.D., Morro Bay, Astoria, and at the buckle end, finally, the letter N (presumably representing north). Executed with remarkable skill and creativity, this belt is as astonishing as any artifact Chris McCandless left behind.

[...]

In early April a long letter arrived in Franz's post-office box bearing a South Dakota postmark. "Hello Ron," it says,

Alex here. I have been working up here in Carthage South Dakota for nearly two weeks now. I arrived up here three days after we parted in Grand Junction, Colorado. I hope that you made it back to Salton City without too many problems. I enjoy working here and things are going well. [...]

I'd like to repeat the advice I gave you before, in that I think you really should make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously never have thought of doing, or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun. If you want to get more out of life, Ron, you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy. But once you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible beauty. And so, Ron, in short, get out of Salton City and hit the Road. [...]

Don't settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon. You are still going to live a long time, Ron, and it would be a shame if you did not take the opportunity to revolutionize your life and move into an entirely new realm of experience.

You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living. [...]

Don't hesitate or allow yourself to make excuses. Just get out and do it. Just get out and do it. You will be very, very glad that you did.

TAKE CARE RON,
ALEX

Astoundingly, the eighty-one-year-old man took the brash twenty-four-year-old vagabond's advice to heart. Franz placed his furniture and most of his other possessions in a storage locker, bought a GMC Duravan, and outfitted it with bunks and camping gear. Then he moved out of his apartment and set up camp on the bajada.

Franz occupied McCandless's old campsite, just past the hot springs. He arranged some rocks to create a parking area for the van, transplanted prickly pears and indigobushes for "landscaping." And then he sat out in the desert, day after day after day, awaiting his young friend's return.